

The Great Society at 50 Part 2

The shift

The Great Society did not just seek to redistribute wealth.

Johnson also set out to shift power in America — from states to Washington, from the legislative branch to the executive, from corporations to federal regulators, from big-city political machines to community groups.

That latter concept of “community action” — funding residents of poor communities so they could organize and mobilize — was one of the Great Society’s most controversial ideas. The concept was to put the poor in a position to help themselves, but it frequently played out in tense and even violent confrontations with the existing local power structure.

It also created a new generation of up-and-coming leaders, rising from the ranks of those who had previously been disenfranchised.

“My mother was clearly the person Lyndon Johnson had in mind with civic action, and she took full advantage of that,” said Ron Kirk, the former mayor of Dallas who served as U.S. trade representative in the Obama administration.

Willie Mae Kirk, who died in September, became a renowned community organizer whose victories included stopping the city of Austin from shutting down its only library branch in a black neighborhood. (One there now is named for her.)

“Part of President Johnson’s absolute genius was putting in place a mechanism that said: ‘You know what? You’re not going to have to be dependent on these, in many cases, biased political bodies,’” her son said. “They wouldn’t pay you lip service, give you an audience, much less put power in the hands of the people.”

For others, the Great Society opened up horizons, as well as opportunities.

When Rodney Ellis was 17, a Great Society program gave him a summer job in a hospital.

“It let me know I could do something other than what my dad did,” Ellis said. “My dad was a yard man.”

He became a slide-rule-team star as part of the Houston’s Inner-City Leadership Development Program — part of Model Cities. At 29, he was elected to the Houston City Council, taking a seat that was created because of the Voting Rights Act. Ellis is now a Texas state senator.

“All of the things that we aspire for in our country really ended up being implemented to some extent in the Great Society,” Ellis said.

Yet in his final years, Johnson mourned what was becoming of his domestic legacy.

“I figured when my legislative program passed the Congress that the Great Society had a real chance to grow into a beautiful woman,” Johnson told biographer Doris Kearns in 1971. “I figured she’d be so big and beautiful that the American people couldn’t help but fall in love with her, and once they did, they’d want to keep her around forever, making her a permanent part of American life, more permanent even than the New Deal.”

“It’s a terrible thing for me to sit by and watch someone else starve my Great Society to death,” Johnson said. “Soon she’ll be so ugly that the American people will refuse to look at her; they’ll stick her in a closet to hide her away and there she’ll die.”



At left, an urban renewal development office in Chicago on June 1969. | Above, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, shown during a lighting test before its opening in September 1971. The national cultural center was a Great Society project.

The legacy

With 50 years’ perspective, there are things that liberals and conservatives agree the Great Society got right, including some that were politically costly in their day.

After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson gloomily observed to Moyers, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”

Few now, however, would dispute that it was a good thing to remove barriers to racial equality — or that government dictate was the only way to do it.

“The anti-discrimination laws that were passed in the 1960s have probably done more to reduce economic inequality than have government programs,” said Diana Furchtgott-Roth, who was the Labor Department’s chief economist during the George W. Bush administration and who is now a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

In addition to tackling the oldest problems, the Great Society took the federal government into realms where it had never gone before.

Chief among them was education. Until the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Washington had never provided comprehensive funding for education below the college level. Its aid to college students was largely limited to helping veterans through the GI Bill.

Where the federal government spent less than \$150 per elementary and high school student in 1960, in inflation-adjusted dollars, the figure by 2011 had reached about \$1,600. In 2008, more than 64 percent of undergraduates on college campuses were receiving federal financial assistance of some kind.

The federal role “has remained controversial to this day,” said Margaret Spellings, education secretary under Bush, whose No Child Left Behind initiative attempted to hold schools more accountable for student achievement.

What would LBJ do? Advice for President Obama

In the Great Society, “what succeeded is resourcing around poor, minority and disadvantaged students, an acknowledgment that there was a role for the federal government to level the playing field,” Spellings said. “. . . What I think has not worked is thinking that that was enough, that just that input would do the job. That’s why things like accountability and No Child Left Behind — fast-forward 40 years — were important, to deliver on the promise.”

Yet the political battle over the Common Core — a set of achievement standards developed by governors and encouraged by the Obama administration — is the latest example of the tension that arises when the federal government puts its finger on the scale in education. Criticism of the Common Core has come from an diverse chorus that includes tea party activists and teachers unions.

Some of the Great Society’s biggest accomplishments are rarely acknowledged today. For instance, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 scrapped a 1920s-era quota system that had effectively shut out most of the world, except for blond, blue-eyed Western Europe.

The 1965 law inviting in Africans, Latin Americans and Asians “was in some ways the most important determinant of our ethnic composition,” said Schuck, who taught immigration law and policy at Yale Law School.

Other Great Society initiatives are being whittled away. In 2013, the Supreme Court [struck down a key part of the Voting Rights Act](#), saying that some of its restrictions are outdated, in light of the racial progress that has been made.

And last month, the court [upheld Michigan’s constitutional amendment banning affirmative action in college admissions](#) — a blow to another Great

Society program that some believe has outlived its usefulness. (Johnson himself thought of affirmative action as a limited, temporary measure, necessary for only a generation or so, Califano said.) Since the ban passed in 2006, black enrollment at the University of Michigan has dropped by a third.

For Gwendolyn Calvert Baker, there was a poignancy in that court decision.

She had been sitting near the front of her 1964 University of Michigan graduating class when Johnson delivered his Great Society speech.

Baker would have been easy to spot in that sea of caps and gowns. She was older than most of the students, a mom who had returned to college on a Rotary Club scholarship. And she was one of only about 200 African Americans on Michigan's campus of nearly 28,000 students.

Baker got her PhD in 1972, joined the Michigan faculty as an education professor, and went on to run the University of Michigan affirmative-action program that in more recent years came under court challenge.

“The content of that speech, I really can't say I remember a lot of it,” said Baker, who is now retired and living in Florida. “But it had meaning. I was feeling good that he was at least thinking in some of the ways I had been thinking.”

A half-century later, Baker said, she is pretty sure she knows what LBJ would think of how it all turned out.

“He would say we've come a long way, but we've still got a long way to go.”

Alice Crites contributed to this report.